Sleepcoding with former CTA developer, John Scott

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

Retracing the backstory of some of the more intriguing games for the Amiga platform, naturally, a number of unanswered questions emerge. Sleepwalker is one such exemplar; a title that began its journey as a purely commercial venture in the traditional manner before morphing into the official Comic Relief charity fund-raiser title in 1993.

Ocean shrewdly snapped up the publishing rights to the acclaimed platform-puzzler and arranged for a portion of the sales profits to be donated to philanthropic causes in Africa and the UK. Comedian Lenny Henry came on board to voice the canine protagonist, and Commodore did their bit too by bundling the game with a special edition Comic Relief Amiga 1200 pack, pledging a gratuity of £10 per unit sold.

Today programmer John Scott has kindly agreed to join us to discuss his involvement with CTA's fondly remembered Sleepwalker project.

John took his first step up the career ladder in 1989 working as a programmer for Teque Software Development in Rotherham. Coding in pure Assembly he focused on the Commodore platforms along with a number of former Gremlin employees who would take responsibility for Teque's Atari ST, Spectrum, Amstrad, and MSX wares.

By 1991 he was primed for a new, more independent challenge. Accordingly, he set up his own partnership along with graphic artist, Richard Cheek. They named their fledgeling development studio 'CTA', the brand under which they would produce their inaugural title, a conversion of Titus' Blues Brothers for the Commodore 64.

Having found their feet the pair progressed towards tackling some *original* inventions; Sleepwalker for the Amiga, Atari ST and DOS, Eek the Cat for the Super Nintendo (a reinvention of Sleepwalker based on the cartoon of the same name), and Cheesy, a third-person 3D platform game for the PlayStation.

Emigrating to Madison, Wisconsin in 1997 John became the Senior Tech Programmer at Raven Software where he was tasked with porting the PC vehicular combat game Necrodome to the PlayStation. Unbeknownst to John at the time it would never be published. He subsequently shifted his attention to Heretic II, Soldier of Fortune 1 and 2 and Quake 4.

Now based in Cary, North Carolina, in 2006 John embraced the role of Senior Engine Programmer at Epic Games where he drastically enhanced the third incarnation of the Unreal engine.

Remaining in North Carolina, from 2013 John has been employed as the CEO/CTO at Eternal Developments. He's

currently operating as a contract programmer concentrating on several top-secret Unreal Engine 4 projects as well as a number of his own sideline initiatives.

Which brings us bang up to date. John's latest contribution to the world of gaming is a Q and A session for Kookosity, so without further ado...

Q. I've read that Sleepwalker had been in the works for two years before it became the official Comic Relief game. How did that transpire?

> A. We (Richard Cheek) and I pitched the Sleepwalker idea to Gary Bracey from Ocean at an ECTS (I think it was the first one that was trade only where the public weren't allowed in). They were very excited with the idea of saving someone as opposed to the typical shoot anything that moves style game. From a technical standpoint, I

wanted to try a new rendering technique from my understanding of how Turrican 2 worked, and we went from there. Our first original IP was born! We then had the opportunity to partner up with Comic Relief, and the humorous cartoon-style violence worked well for them, as did the concept for us.

Q. With hindsight was it a good decision to agree to Ocean publishing it partially as a charity fundraiser?

A. Success with a brand new IP is very difficult, and CTA Developments was also a very new company with minimal track record, so there was a good chance of Sleepwalker disappearing without trace even with the backing of Ocean. Partnering with Comic Relief was a great idea; it fit in well with the game, gave us some publicity, and we helped the community at large.

Q. Did you have to make any adjustments to your original blueprint to adapt it for the license?

A. Very little. We already had a collection system in place to enable comic events at the end of each level, we just needed to change the pickups to spell COMIC (I think they were balloons originally).

Q. Was there anything you would have liked to, but weren't able to implement due to time constraints or technical limitations?

A. For every game I've ever written (and I'm fairly sure this applies to other mediums too) there have been items that I wished we had done better, or cut, or polished a bit more. Nothing springs to mind specifically about Sleepwalker, except I wish we'd had more time to improve the 1200 version more.

Q. I've noticed it shares a similar premise to reLINE's 1988 Pink Panther game, as well as Zeppelin's Sleepwalker released in 1992? Did either of these (or something else) serve as inspiration for your game? Were you even aware these existed at the time?

A. Zeppelin's Sleepwalker was released after we'd been in development for a while. It was only for 8 bit machines, and didn't have a good 'feel'. I had to look up the Pink Panther game, as I'd never heard of it, but it looks like an Amiga game made before better techniques were found.

Q. Did you get to work with Lenny Henry or Harry Enfield? Did they have any input other than providing the voice-overs?

A. Most of the interaction with Comic Relief was handled by Ocean as it was almost all marketing and publicity. We were also sleep deprived from crunching far too much, so too much interaction would have been counter-productive. They helped with the comedy scenes, voice-overs, and some of the story.

Q. The manual alludes to being rewarded with a special Easter egg of some kind should you reach the end having solved all the bonus puzzles. What did that entail?

A. I'm afraid I do not remember - it could have been a special movie.

Q. How did Sleepwalker come to be retooled as an 'Eek! The Cat' licensed game for the SNES?

A. After we'd completed Sleepwalker, we were looking for a way to get onto the platform of the day - the SNES - and a conversion of Sleepwalker fit perfectly. We watched some of the cartoons and wondered if the authors had played our game!

Q. In the credits 'Bradford Business Computers' are thanked for their data recovery services. You didn't nearly lose all your hard work, did you?

A. Bradford Business Services did recover all our data at one point; we had a hard drive failure and with there being only one coder and no such thing as source control - we had to have it recovered. Something that will never be repeated!

A fascinating glance behind the curtain of '90s game development I'm sure you'll agree. All that remains is to say a big thank you to Scott for generously giving up his time to satisfy my nerdy curiosity. It's much appreciated. :)